

A Test of Honesty, Not Knowledge

By Konstantin Sonin

Soviet leader Josef Stalin and his henchmen discredited the word "sabotage" by accusing political opponents and their followers of the crime with reckless abandon. The dictionary defines sabotage as "deliberately disrupting an event, evading work or working in a deliberately dishonest or unscrupulous manner." However, because Stalin's regime never produced any proof that various groups were actually guilty of sabotage -- from kulaks accused of undermining the grain harvest to engineers blamed for sabotaging industry and peasant Soviet Army commanders accused of subterfuge in their war preparations -- the word became discredited.

But "sabotage" is a good word, and it is difficult to avoid the temptation to use it when speaking about the way the EGE -- the nationwide standardized college admissions exam -- was administered in Moscow recently. A professor at one of Moscow's leading universities told me of how, during the math exam on June 4, his department was overrun with a throng of parents and friends of the test takers -- who, by the way, had downloaded entire sample tests and math problems onto their cell phones. University students were also constantly taking calls, answering questions from the kids as they took the test. This is no isolated incident: The scene was repeated in thousands of classrooms all across Russia. High school teachers have complained to me that the individuals charged with administering the test were especially lax this year. This suggests that opponents of the EGE who were unable to convince the authorities to abolish the test have resorted to discrediting the exam in order to achieve the same result.

Of course, the government should have the courage to defend its standardized exam (all the more since the results of the math exam indicate that saboteurs had little success in subverting the test). However, it is not always appropriate to be overly uncompromising. It is one thing to resist self-serving opposition from this or that special interest group but quite another to ignore educators, students and their parents when their only goal is to express genuine dissatisfaction with shortcomings in the test itself. What if, for example, the people administering the test in Moscow simply wanted to help the students make a better showing against students from Russia's other regions who unexpectedly performed better than expected them last year?

This phenomenon is not peculiar to Moscow alone. Last year, a teacher from a regional capital complained to me that standardized test results from rural students were significantly higher than students in city schools had scored -- the reverse was to be expected under normal circumstances. Some changes are perhaps in order for the EGE.

One obvious problem is that colleges and universities must place too much emphasis on EGE results for their admission process. The whole process would be easier for everybody concerned if the institutions were allowed to set the number of places that would be allocated on the basis of EGE results -- and would therefore be eligible for state scholarships -- as well as how many would be determined according to the university's own placement test and how many would be available to all comers willing to pay a standard fee. That way, students with exceptional or above-average abilities (who, by the way, suffer the most from artificially high scores from the regions) would not be forced to achieve outstanding EGE scores at any price, and those who currently sabotage the results in order to help them would feel less of a need to do so, thereby making discipline easier to enforce. In principle, the annual nationwide "Olympiads" hosted at universities that test students in their knowledge of basic academic subjects should serve this function to some extent. But somebody got the brilliant idea that the Olympiads should be broken down by grade and that universities should admit students based on standardized tests conducted by an "independent" and "impartial" system. Was it really so difficult to foresee that the people charged with administering such a test would be willing to fudge the results in favor of the test takers? Or is it necessary to go back to the dictionary and reread the definition of "subversive activity"?

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